Disclosed are apparatus and related methods for condimenting and serving popped popcorn kernels and other finger foods (collectively finger foods). In one non-limiting embodiment, the apparatus is a tubiform bag with first and second closable openings respectively located at the ends of the bags tubiform. A related method may comprise the steps of: obtaining an open ended tubiform body with a first end and a second end; closing the second end; orienting the tubiform body so that the first end is above the second end; placing finger food into the tubiform through the first end; condimenting the finger food through the first end; closing the first end; orienting the tubiform body so that the second end is above the first end; opening the second end; and, condimenting the finger food through the second end.
FOODSTUFF CONDIMIENTING AND SERVING CONTAINER & RELATED METHODS OF USE

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] Not applicable.

STATEMENT REGARDING FEDERALLY SPONSORED RESEARCH OR DEVELOPMENT

[0002] Not Applicable.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] 1. Field of Invention
[0004] This application is in the field of combined condimenting and serving containers for finger foods.

[0005] 2. Background
[0006] Popped popcorn kernels (“popcorn”) are a foodstuff which persons, particularly spectators of an event (e.g., a sporting event or a movie exhibition), are frequently desirous of eating. Sometimes people like to flavor their popcorn with a condiment (e.g., seasoning or butter). Accordingly, there is a need for apparatus and related methods of applying condiments to popcorn.

[0007] Typically, popcorn kernels are separated from their cobs and popped in batches. One known way of applying condiments (e.g., butter, salt) to popcorn that has been so popped involves placing the batch of popped kernels into a container with a condiment and mixing the kernels within the container until the condiment is evenly dispersed throughout the batch. Although useful for applying a condiment to popcorn in many instances, batch-wide mixing of popcorn with a condiment is not entirely satisfactory for batches that represent more than one serving of popcorn kernels since the servings may be eaten by persons of different tastes or nutritional preferences. As a result, there is a need for apparatus and related methods of uniformly applying condiments to individual servings of popped popcorn kernels.

[0008] To meet the above identified need, some have applied batch-wise mixing of popcorn with a condiment to individual servings, wherein the serving is placed in a container with a condiment and mixed until the condiment is evenly dispersed among the kernels. While generally a useful technique for applying condiments to popcorn servings, such a technique is unsatisfactory in many circumstances. For instance, popcorn serving containers (e.g., movie theater or sporting event popcorn bags or tubs) are frequently filled to their brim with popped kernels so that the resultant serving cannot easily be mixed with a condiment without spilling kernels from the container. In such instances the condiment is usually unsatisfactorily provided to a portion of the popcorn either: (A) without mixing (e.g., on top) wherein (1) the condiment trickles through some of the popcorn kernels (usually about half way through) and (2) the condiment must be reapplied after a substantial portion of the condensed kernels are eaten (we note that reapplication is particularly bothersome during a movie or sporting event since focus must be shifted away from the movie or sport); or (B) with mixing after a layer of popcorn has been eaten, wherein a portion of the serving is less enjoyable. Thus, the need for apparatus and related methods of applying condiments to individual servings of popped popcorn kernels remains in circumstances wherein popcorn is served in containers that are substantially full.

[0009] One specific attempt to meet said remaining need is described in U.S. Pub. Pat. App. 2007/0269573 (published Nov. 22, 2007). The cited patent application discloses an attachment for a popcorn serving container which increases the volume of the serving container to facilitate trickling of a condiment through popcorn kernels via agitation of the kernels without spilling. While an improvement, the serving container attachment does not entirely meet the identified need because the mixing mechanism still relies on trickling of the condiment so that some kernels (particularly those at the bottom of the container) may not be appropriately condimented. Thus, a need for improved apparatus and related methods of applying condiments to individual servings of popped popcorn kernels exists in circumstances wherein popcorn is served in containers that are substantially full.

[0010] Please note that the above described needs are set forth in connection with applying condiments to popcorn. However, the same needs are applicable to a variety of finger foods such as chicken fingers, french-fries, salads, doughnut holes, candies, and the like. Accordingly, there is a related need for improved apparatus and methods for applying condiments to individual servings of finger foods generally.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0011] In view of the foregoing, it is an object of this application to disclose apparatus and related methods for condimenting and serving popped popcorn kernels and other finger foods (collectively finger foods). In one non-limiting embodiment, the apparatus is a tubiform bag with first and second closable openings respectively located at the ends of the bag’s tubiform. A related method may comprise the steps of: obtaining an open ended tubiform body with a first end and a second end; closing the second end; orienting the tubiform body so that the first end is above the second end; placing finger food into the tubiform through the first end; condimenting the finger food through the first end; closing the first open end; orienting the tubiform body so that the second end is above the first end; opening the second end; and, condimenting the finger food through the second end.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

[0012] The manner in which these objectives and other desirable characteristics can be obtained is better explained in the following description and attached figures in which:

[0013] FIG. 1 is a perspective of an open ended tubiform bag 100;

[0014] FIG. 2 is a perspective of the open ended tubiform bag 100 of FIG. 1 with one of the ends closed;

[0015] FIG. 3 is a flowchart for operating the open ended tubiform bag 100 of FIG. 1;

[0016] FIG. 4 is a perspective of another configuration of the open ended tubiform bag 100; and,

[0017] FIG. 5 is perspective of a modification of the configuration of the open ended tubiform bag 100 depicted in FIG. 4.

[0018] It is to be noted, however, that the appended figures illustrate only a typical embodiment of a bag. As a result, the figures are not to be considered limiting of the scope of the underlying invention. That is to say, the disclosed invention may admit to other equally effective embodiments that will be
appreciated by those reasonably skilled in the relevant arts and the drawings are not necessarily drawn to scale.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0019] This application discloses a finger food condimentation and serving container. Generally, the disclosed container is an open ended tubiform bag with closable openings respectively at the ends of the tubiform. In basic operation, the bag may be filled with finger food and condiments may be provided to the contained finger food through either opening. The specific details of a preferable embodiment of the container are described with reference to the attached figures.

[0020] FIG. 1 is a perspective of an open ended bag 100. Structurally, the depicted bag 100 features: a tubiform body 200 with a first opening 300 and a second opening 400. As shown, the tubiform body 200 may be accordion folded (in the manner disclosed by U.S. Pub. Pat. App. 2007/0269573 (published Nov. 22, 2007) or by any other manner known to those of skill in the art) so that the tubiform body 200 may be compressible lengthwise or expandable between the first and second openings (discussed in further detail with reference to FIGS. 4 and 5) so that the accordion folded tubiform body 200 may be (a) restricted from collapsing via operation of stops 201 distributed along the length and around the circumference of the tubiform body 200 and (b) restricted from expanding via locking tabs 202 and slits 203. The first and second openings 300 and 400 may respectively feature tie tabs 301 and 401 (e.g., tin tie tabs).

[0021] Although FIG. 1 depicts the bag 100 with a tubiform body 200 having a generally square cross section, the tubiform body 200 may define a cross section having any geometric shape, including but not limited to round, square, rectangle, oval, polygonal, trapezoidal, and other shapes known in the art. For instance, the cross section may be round or oval with collapsibility being provided via a helical fold or support (e.g., like a compressible or expansible spring).

[0022] FIG. 2 is a perspective of the open ended tubiform bag 100 of FIG. 1 with the second opening 400 closed. The manner by which the second opening 400 is closed may vary, but in the disclosed embodiment, the opening 400 may be closed in the same manner by which bagged coffee grinds are closed. That is to say, the opening 400 may be closed by the tie tabs 401, wherein two sides of the opening are brought together, folded or rolled over, and then secured with the tie tabs. The first opening 300 may also be closed in substantially the same manner as the second opening 400 via tie tabs 301. It should be noted, however, that the openings 300 and 400 may be closed in any manner in addition to the tie tabs 301 and 401, including fold, draw string, reusable adhesive, snap fit, zipper, or the like.

[0023] FIG. 3 is a flowchart for operating the tubiform bag 100 of FIG. 1. As shown in the figure, the open ended tubiform bag 100 may first be uprightly oriented with the first opening 300 positioned above the second opening 400. Second, the second opening may be closed as described above in connection with FIG. 2. Third, the bag 100 may be filled with a finger food 1 through the open first opening 300. Fourth, the finger food 1 may be condimented with a first condiment 2 through the first opening 300. Fifth, the first opening 300 may be closed as described above in connection with FIG. 2. Sixth, the bag 100 may be rotated so that it is uprightly oriented with the second opening 400 positioned above the first opening. Seventh, the second opening 400 may be opened to reveal the finger food 1. Finally, the finger food may be condimented with second condiment 3 through the second opening 400. It should be noted that first and second condiments may be the same condiment, wherein the designation of first and second identifies that the condiment is applied twice. It should also be noted that, in the above described process, the first opening 300 and the second opening 400 may be interchanged without affecting the results of the method.

[0024] As alluded to above while discussing FIG. 1, the accordion folded tubiform body 200 may be (a) restricted from expanding via locking tabs 202 and slits 203 and (b) restricted from collapsing via operation of stops 201 distributed along the length and around the circumference of the tubiform body 200. FIGS. 4 and 5 depict the mechanisms for restricting expansion of the accordion folded body 200. FIG. 4 depicts the bag 100 of FIG. 2 with a slightly different configuration wherein one of the perforated tabs 202 is extended outwardly from the body 200 and wherein the slit 203 is open. FIG. 5 depicts the bag 100 of FIG. 4 with the accordion folds between the extended tab 202 and open slit 203 collapsed so that the tab 202 may be inserted through the open slit 203 whereby the collapsed accordion folds 203 may not be expanded without releasing the tab 202 from the slit 203. FIGS. 4 and 5 also depict the mechanism for restricting the collapse of the accordion folded body 200. As shown in FIGS. 4 and 5, the perforated expansion stops 201 are pushed in so that the associated accordion fold is restrictive from collapsing.

[0025] FIGS. 6A through 6C illustrates an application of the above identified mechanisms for restricting the expansion or collapse of the tubiform bag 100. Operaerly, the identified mechanisms may be employed so that the bag may accommodate different serving sizes of finger foods. Referring once again to FIG. 4, the depicted bag 100 is shown with three levels of steps 201, two levels of tabs 202, and two levels of slits 203. In a preferable mode of operation, all of the three levels of stops 201 may be activated so that the bag 100 is restricted from total collapse and to accommodate a large finger food serving (see, e.g., FIG. 6A). In the same preferable mode of operation, two levels of stops 201, one tab 202, and one slit 203 may be activated to accommodate a medium sized food serving (see, e.g., FIG. 6B). Finally, in the same mode of operation one level of stops 201, one tab 202, and one slit 203 may be activated to accommodate a small food serving (see, e.g., FIG. 6C). As a result, one bag 100 is adaptable for serving different sizes of finger food servings. Although the depicted bag is only shown in a configuration for three sizes, any number of serving sizes can be accommodated via the provision of stops 201, tabs 202, and slits 203.

[0026] In one embodiment, the tubiform bag 100 depicted in the figures may be formed of materials suitable for retaining and serving finger foods. Such materials include, but should not be limited to, paper, plastic, cardboard, cardboard, insulated paper, wax paper, foil, combinations thereof, and the like. Other materials suitable for use in connection with this disclosure may become recognizable by those having ordinary skill in the relevant arts and such materials are contemplated as being within the scope, spirit, and intent of the invention. This specification and the below listing of claims shall therefore be read and understood to include any of such materials.

[0027] In one embodiment the disclosed finger food is popped popcorn kernels. However, it is contemplated that any finger food may be served and condimented by the disclosed
apparatus, including but not limited to chicken nuggets, chicken fingers, french-fries, tater tots, doughnut holes, candy pieces, popcorn kernels, nuts, fruits or fruit slices, vegetables or vegetable slices, foodstuff crumbs or pieces of any kind, or the like.

In one embodiment the disclosed condiment is butter or butter flavored oils. However, it is contemplated that any condiment may be provided to finger foods via the disclosed apparatus. Such condiments include, but should not be limited to, sauces (e.g., melted cheese, barbeque sauce, melted butter or butter flavored oils, salad dressings (e.g. ranch dressing), ketchup, mustard and the like), spices, seasonings, crumbled food stuffs (e.g., cheese crumbs or candy crumbs) and the like.

By way of summary, what is disclosed may be an open ended tubiform container for condimenting and serving finger foods. In one embodiment the open ends of the tubiform may be closed or closed at a time so that the finger may be deposited therein, provided with a condiment through a first opening, and provided with a condiment through the second opening. In another embodiment the container is lengthwise collapsible and expandable with respect to the tubiform. What is also disclosed may be a method of condimenting a finger food comprising the steps of: obtaining an open ended tubiform body with a first end and a second end; closing the second end; orienting the tubiform body so that the first end is above the second end; placing finger food into the tubiform through the first end; condimenting the finger food through the first end; closing the first open end; orienting the tubiform body so that the second end is above the first end; opening the second end; and, condimenting the finger food through the second end. The above method could be applied to buttering popped popcorn kernels, placing sauces on chicken nuggets or wings, placing salad dressing on salads, placing seasoning on french-fries, or similar placements of condiments.

This specification and the appended figures illustrate only typical embodiments or principles disclosed in this application, and therefore, are not to be considered limiting of its scope, for the invention may admit to other equally effective embodiments that will be appreciated by those reasonably skilled in the relevant arts. Any invention disclosed by this specification is defined by the claims.

I claim:

1. A method of serving and condimenting finger foods comprising the steps of:
   obtaining an open ended tubiform body with a first end and a second end;
   closing the second end;
   placing finger food into the tubiform through the first end;
   applying a condiment to the finger food through the first end;
   closing the first end;
   opening the second end; and,
   applying a condiment to the finger food through the second end.

2. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of orienting the tubiform body so that the first end is above the second end prior to the step of contacting the finger food with a condiment through the first end.

3. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of orienting the tubiform body so that the second end is above the first end prior to the step of applying a condiment to the finger food through the second end.

4. The method of claim 1 further comprising the steps of:
   orienting the tubiform body so that the first end is above the second end prior to the step of contacting the finger food with a condiment through the first end; and,
   orienting the tubiform body so that the second end is above the first end prior to the step of contacting the finger food with a condiment through the second end.

5. The method of claim 1 wherein the finger food is selected from the group consisting essentially of chicken nuggets, chicken fingers, french-fries, tater tots, doughnut holes, candy pieces, popped popcorn kernels, nuts, fruits, fruit slices, vegetables, vegetable slices, foodstuff crumbs or pieces.

6. The method of claim 1 wherein the condiment is selected from the group consisting essentially of sauces, spices, seasonings, crumbled foodstuff, butter, or butter flavored oil.

7. The method of claim 1 wherein the tubiform body is expandable.

8. The method of claim 7 further comprising the step of expanding the body before the step of placing the finger food into the tubiform through the first end.

9. A method of serving and condimenting finger foods comprising the steps of:
   obtaining an open ended tubiform body with a first end and a second end;
   closing the second end;
   orienting the tubiform body so that the first end is above the second end;
   placing finger food into the tubiform through the first end;
   condimenting the finger food through the first end;
   closing the first open end;
   orienting the tubiform body so that the second end is above the first end;
   opening the second end; and,
   condimenting the finger food through the second end.

10. The method of claim 9 wherein the finger food is selected from the group consisting essentially of chicken nuggets, chicken fingers, french-fries, tater tots, doughnut holes, candy pieces, popped popcorn kernels, nuts, fruits, fruit slices, vegetables, vegetable slices, foodstuff crumbs or pieces.

11. The method of claim 9 wherein the condimenting is accomplished via contacting the food stuff with a condiment selected from the group consisting essentially of sauces, spices, seasonings, crumbled foodstuff, butter, or butter flavored oil.

12. The method of claim 9 wherein the tubiform body is partially collapsible.

13. The method of claim 12 further comprising the step of partially collapsing the body before the step of placing the finger food into the tubiform through the first end.

14. A container for condimenting and serving finger foods comprising: a tubiform body that has a first open end that is electively closable end, a second open end that is electively closable.

15. The container of claim 1 wherein the tubiform body features accordion folds whereby the body is electively collapsible or expandable.

16. The container of FIG. 1 with the first end open and the second end closed.

17. The container of FIG. 1 with the second end open and the first end closed.

18. The container of claim 15 featuring stops for restricting the collapse of the body.
19. The container of claim 15 featuring at least one tab and at least one slit for restricting the expansion of the body.

20. The container of claim 15 wherein the tubiform is configured to electively expand or collapse into large, medium, and small configurations.